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SUBJECT: JICA PRESIDENT OGATA MEETS SYRIA'S ASAD

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Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)
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11. (C) SUMMARY: Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) President Sadako Ogata met March 12 in Damascus with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. According to MOFA, their discussion focused on economic assistance and did not address political issues. Japan believes it necessary to maintain cordial relations with Syria in order to foster economic reform and to retain leverage needed to encourage Damascus to play a constructive role in the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). Japan is directing its Official Development Assistance (ODA) programs in Syria to projects that will improve the quality of life for average Syrians. Asad did not seem to be fully aware of the details of Japan's assistance to his country and discussed issues Syria is facing with regard to the influx of Iraqi refugees. During Ogata's separate meeting with Deputy Prime Minister al-Dardari, Japanese Ambassador to Damascus Kunieda raised the issue of difficulties faced by NGO's working to help deal with the refugee situation. While in the region, Ogata also visited Israel and the West Bank. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) JICA President (and former UNHCR head) Ogata visited Syria March 10-13 during a visit to the Middle East region. (NOTE: On Department's instructions, Embassy had requested that Ogata forego her visit to Syria; however, MOFA responded it did not consider her to be a "government official" and therefore believed her visit would not conflict with our policy of discouraging visits to Damascus by high-level officials (refs). END NOTE.) While in Syria, Ogata held meetings with President al-Asad, Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdullah al-Dardari, and Chairman of the State Planning Commission Taiseer al-Redawi. Ogata had yet to return to Tokyo when we met with MOFA Aid Policy and Management Division Principal Deputy Director Toshihiro Kitamura, but he provided us with a readout based on diplomatic reports from Japan's Embassy in Damascus.

JAPAN'S ODA TO SYRIA

13. (C) Japan considers Syria to be an important player in the MEPP, and also believes steps should be taken to encourage reform in its economic sector, according to Kitamura, who said Japan's rather modest ODA program with Syria is focused on basic human needs issues aimed at improving the quality of life for ordinary Syrians. The four major priorities are on projects that promote modernization of the economy, management and effective use of water resources, improvement of social services, and environmental protection. In 2006, JICA made available a grant of approximately USD 5 million for a waste management and removal project in Damascus, and small "grassroots" grants amounting to approximately USD 380,000 covering vocational training, medical services, and a women's center. In 2007, a USD 4.5 million grant was given for Phase II of the Damascus waste project, and another USD 380,000 for local community grassroots projects, again focusing on improving medical facilities and kindergarten education.

MEETING WITH ASAD

14. (C) According to Kitamura, Ogata's meeting with Asad was in her capacity as the chief of the implementing agency for Japan's ODA, so the only topics discussed were related to economic issues, not politics. Ogata briefed Asad on JICA's activities in Syria, which began in the 1970's and have been limited in scope, highlighting their focus on meeting the basic needs of the Syrian people, particularly in the spheres of water resources, agriculture, and environmental issues.

15. (C) Asad told Ogata that economic development and political stability are both important, and must be advanced together, reported Kitamura. He said the regional situation is not stable, and wants to encourage further economic development that will improve the quality of life in Syria. He said he would like to advance Syria's collaboration with JICA, but it was clear he lacked a detailed understanding of JICA's activities. He mentioned to Ogata that a major problem Syria faces is a lack of capacity, and said he hoped Japan could help provide technical training and assistance. Ogata replied that this is what JICA is doing, and informed him that there are currently 52 Japanese technical experts in Syria to assist with capacity building, along with 15 members of Japan's Overseas Cooperation Volunteers corps.

16. (C) Asad also discussed the need to develop new, environmentally sound energy production technologies that rely on existing resources while, at the same time, developing new, clean technologies, such as solar power. Ogata replied by briefing him on a program Japan is supporting in Damascus to turn trash into energy. (NOTE: Responding to a question from political officer, Kitamura said there had been no mention of nuclear power. END NOTE.)

IRAQI REFUGEES

17. (C) Asad then raised the subject of Iraqi refugees, asserting that Syria has admitted 1.5 million in the past two years, and that these numbers are difficult for Syria to absorb. He claimed Syria is currently providing a free education to 200,000 Iraqis, saying that providing education is necessary for a better future, but also admitting his concerns that Iraqi youths in his country with nothing to do or nowhere to go would likely cause crime and other problems. He also complained of the burden of providing health care services to the Iraqi refugee population. (NOTE: In 2007, Japan gave a total of USD 8.5 million to the UNHCR to be used to assist Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan. END NOTE.)

OTHER MEETINGS

18. (C) In addition to meeting with Asad, Ogata also met with Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdallah al-Dardari on March 11, and with Chairman of the State Planning Commission Taiseer al-Ridawi. Kitamura reported both meetings covered basically the same points as the Asad meeting, but in greater detail, as both Dardari and Ridawi are more familiar with JICA's projects and activities. He said that during the Dardari meeting, Japanese Ambassador Masaki Kunieda had raised the issue of difficulties faced by NGO's working with Iraqi refugees. (NOTE: Kitamura said this topic was raised because someone in the Department had requested the Japanese Embassy in Washington to include it in Ogata's points. END NOTE.) Dardari replied that he would call this to the attention of the minister in charge of working with the Red Crescent. Ogata also reportedly visited Aleppo while in Syria, but Kitamura did not provide any details about this portion of the visit.

ISRAEL AND WEST BANK

19. (C) During her trip, Ogata also met in Israel with Foreign Minister Livni and in the West Bank with Prime Minister Fayyad and Chief Negotiator Erekat. Topics of discussion focused on Japan's support for its Corridor for Peace and Prosperity initiative, and for the need to alleviate humanitarian suffering in Gaza. Kitamura had no further details to share concerning these meetings.

COMMENT

110. (C) Kitamura said MOFA will instruct its Embassies in Damascus and Washington to provide us with debriefings about Ogata's trip. Embassy Tokyo recommends Embassy Damascus try to meet with Japanese Ambassador Kunieda, who accompanied Ogata throughout her visit and to all her meetings.

Political officer reminded Kitamura of our preference that senior government officials not visit Syria, as such visits only serve to bolster the Asad regime and provide him with propaganda material. In fact, Kitamura provided a copy of the front page of the Syria Times featuring a photo of the Asad-Ogata meeting. Also noted was disappointment that Ogata had apparently not, in response to Asad's complaints about Iraqi refugees, observed that by offering support and shelter to Iraqi Ba'ath party members and their funds, and by providing a route for the foreign fighters whose atrocities lead to the sectarian violence and divide that has caused people to flee, Syria itself bears heavy responsibility for the refugee problem.

SCHIEFFER